DISCERNMENT
Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 2 | Issue 2 Article 1

2016

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Steve Cloer
secloer@yahoo.com

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***Abstract**: This essay is the summary of a research project focused on how the minister-elder relationship in Churches of Christ can facilitate missional transformation in an established church. Twenty-five reputable congregations of Churches of Christ were researched that were profiled as "Churches That Work" by The Christian Chronicle from 2006-2013. A survey was conducted of these congregations' elders and ministers assessing their leadership practices and perspectives. Four congregations were selected based on results of the survey and qualitative strategies of interviewing, focus groups, observation, and document gathering were used. Five patterns of a missional polity developed: elders as nurturing pastors, ministers as missional catalysts, elders and ministers as team, the wilderness, and a missional identity.*

Churches of Christ have been on a plateau or in decline for the past several years.[1] There may be several reasons for this stagnation, but one key factor is the changing context in the United States. Many congregations today now find themselves surrounded by diverse demographics, changing neighborhoods, and postmodern thinking. Previously, churches could rely on a familiarity or even an appreciation of God, Scripture, and the church among their neighbors. The primary and successful method to grow the church was developing programs that attracted people to church buildings because of the supposed common cultural foundation. Today, this is not the case. Established churches in urban areas find themselves surrounded by secular ideas and religious indifference. Because of this,

[1] Flavil R. Yeakley Jr., *Why They Left: Listening to Those Who Have Left Churches of Christ* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 2012), 33; Bobby Ross Jr., "2009 in Review: Membership Decline Is Top Story," *Christian Chronicle* (January 2010), http://www.christianchronicle.org/article2158965~2009_in_review:_Membership_decline_is_top_story (accessed Jan. 23, 2010). For further and more recent coverage, see Bobby Ross Jr., "165,000 Fewer Souls in the Pews: Five Questions to Consider," *Christian Chronicle*, http://www.christianchronicle.org/article/165-000-fewer-souls-in-the-pews-five-questions-to-consider (accessed March 9, 2015).

many are struggling with decline and feel great anxiety about the future of their congregations and the fellowship of Churches of Christ. It has become apparent that the church desperately needs to recapture her missional identity and begin to live into that reality in order to survive in an urban, diverse, and post-churched culture. Yet, courageous and unified leadership within the local congregation is needed in order for such a missional transformation to take place.

The term "missional" will be used as an adjective in this essay for such terms as "identity," "ecclesiology", "transformation", "polity", and "change." It describes the idea of conceiving the church's identity as derived from the mission of God. Structures contributing to this understanding and encouraging participation in God's mission would be a "missional polity." Churches experiencing movement toward this understanding would be experiencing "missional transformation" or "missional change."[2]

The dominant form of leadership within Churches of Christ is a congregational polity in which the members appoint a plurality of believers called elders who voluntarily lead, guide, and oversee the church. The elders hire ministers to carry out the day-to-day ministries of the congregation. The ministers are theologically trained and assume many of the public roles of teaching and leadership, yet their authority is limited to the leadership and positional authority of the elders. This relationship sometimes becomes quite complex and conflicted, to the point of creating ministry burnout.[3] Often this occurs because of the ambiguity surrounding the role of minister, an ambiguity stretching back to the beginning of the Stone-Campbell heritage.[4] Because of this ambiguity, many churches often struggle with leadership, transformation, and growth.

My desire was to engage in social-science research addressing both of these challenging issues. I wanted to explain how an established church can experience missional transformation and move from a programmatic and attractional model that seeks to bring people to a building to an understanding of the church as a body of believers that are sent as witnesses

[2] For more on the "missional" concept, see Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, The Missional Network (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[3] Grady King, email correspondence with author, Oct. 17, 2013. King did an informal survey of over ten current or former ministers in Churches of Christ around the topic of minister burnout. He discovered the top reason related to church governance issues.

[4] For more on the history of the elder-minister dynamic within the Stone-Campbell Movement, see Steve Cloer, "The Elder-Evangelist Relationship Through the Stone-Campbell Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 58 4 (2016): 229-239.

of God's redemptive reign. However, there is little hope for missional traction to move forward without the minister-elder relationship being understood and developed; instead, churches will tend to become conflicted and could end up declining or even dying because of the changing context. Consequently, this research project focused on the minister-elder relationship: seeking to understand what elders and ministers need to be doing—both individually and collectively—to help congregations experience missional transformation. This essay is a brief summary of the research that was done and the results it uncovered.[5]

Research Design

The newspaper *The Christian Chronicle* has featured certain U.S. congregations of Churches of Christ in a profile called "Churches That Work" since 2005.[6] The *Chronicle* selects congregations for this profile using three criteria. First, they are congregations that are united and healthy, with no divisions or factions. Second, they are congregations engaged in their community, with outreach ministries that connect and bless the people around them. Third, they are congregations that have a breadth of ministries active within their church.[7] The *Chronicle* selected twenty-five congregations from 2005 to 2013, including congregations from the West Coast down through the South. Various racial/ethnic groups were represented in the congregations. The size of these congregations ranged from quite large (over 1,000 attendees) to small (around 100 attendees). These congregations formed the population that I used for my research.

This population was chosen because of certain traits that the congregations already exhibited in the areas that I wanted to study. The fact that these churches have been profiled as "Churches That Work" qualifies these congregations as those who are experiencing some level of missional transformation. They are respected congregations within the mainstream fellowship of Churches of Christ; thus, they provide a quality population to research concerning the role that the minister-elder relationship is playing in that transformation. My goal was to use these congregations as a

[5] To learn more about this research project in-depth, see Steve Cloer, "Missional Polity: The Minister-Elder Relationship in Churches of Christ Experiencing Missional Transformation," DMin thesis (Luther Seminary, 2015).

[6] *Christian Chronicle*, "Churches That Work," http://www.christianchronicle.org/continuing-coverage/churches-that-work (accessed Aug. 15, 2013).

[7] Lynn McMillon, Interview by author, Aug. 15, 2013; Erik Tryggestad, "Why I Can't Stand Churches That Work," *Christian Chronicle*, http://www.christianchronicle.org/article/why-i-cant-stand-churches-that-work (accessed May 13, 2014). The current editor Tryggestad defines the criteria as churches who are "evangelistic, biblical, united, and visible."

population in which I could study the leadership of each congregation in order to explain the phenomenon of the minister-elder relationship within these congregations.

My research contained two phases. The first involved conducting a survey of the ministers and elders from the twenty-five congregations. The second phase involved the selection of four congregations based on the data gathered from the survey and analyzing the minister-elder relationship at these congregations utilizing qualitative research. Finally, the data gathered from the second phase were integrated with the data from the first phase to develop qualified assertions about how ministers and elders can function to facilitate a congregation experiencing missional transformation.[8] See Figure 1 below for a visual model of the research design.

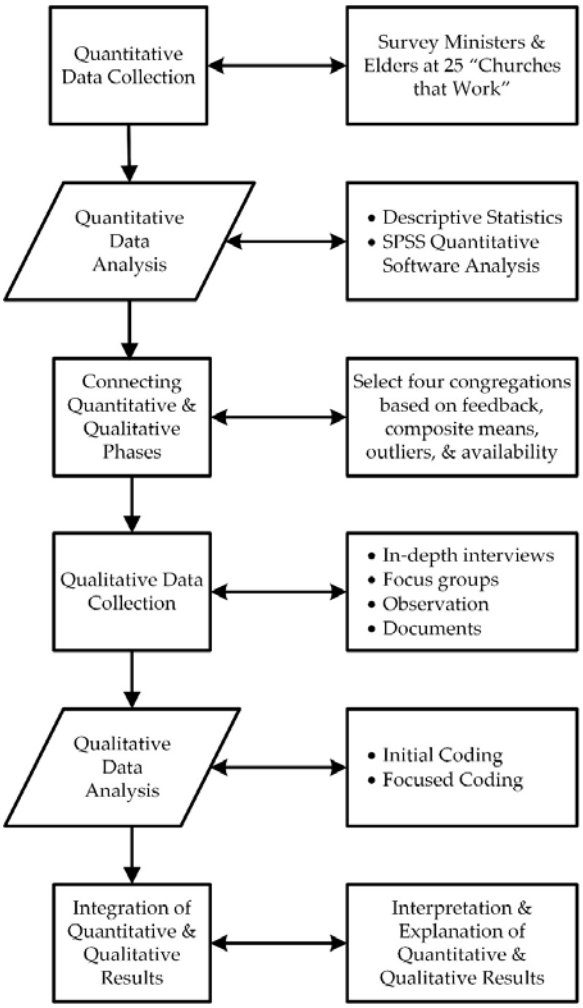

Figure 1 - Visual Model of Sequential Explanatory Research Design

[8] Nataliya V. Ivankova, John W. Creswell, and Sheldon L. Stick, "Using Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design: From Theory to Practice," *Field Methods* 18 (2006): 16.

First Phase

I conducted a survey of the ministers and elders at the twenty-five congregations selected as "Churches That Work." The survey consisted of a self-administered questionnaire that contained five sections. First, the questionnaire asked background questions about the individual and their respective congregation, including the type of leadership position they held, length of time serving in that position, length of time at that congregation, age, and time being a Christian. Also, questions were asked about church size, age, and the demographic makeup of the congregation and surrounding neighborhood. Second, questions assessed the missional leadership practices of the individual leader, including empowerment, discernment, spiritual direction, mentoring, preaching, evangelism, serving the poor, and spiritual disciplines.[9]

Third, questions assessed the level of minister-elder collaboration within various congregational practices, including spiritual disciplines, decision-making, visioning, delegating, discernment, collaboration, and handling conflict.[10] Fourth, a set of continuum questions related to minister and elder role understanding were given. These questions invited the participant to prioritize various practices and perspectives in their understanding and living out the role of the elder or minister. These questions assessed the respondent's understanding of the primary responsibility of the minister, the primary responsibility of the elder, the role most responsible for casting the missional vision, the value of the two groups working together, and the primary leadership responsibility for both groups collectively.[11] Also, an open-ended question concluded this section by asking for any further input about the minister-elder relationship at their congregation. Finally, a set of questions assessed various congregational characteristics that exhibit missional transformation: evangelism, service to the world, discipleship, hospitality, risk taking, and strong relationships.[12]

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[9] These missional leadership practices were gleaned from these key sources. Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 63-107; Scott Cormode, "Muti-Layered Leadership: The Christian Leader as Builder, Shepherd, and Gardener," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1 (2002): 88-104; Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World*, Leadership Network Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 3-35.

[10] These collaborative practices were gleaned from the previous mentioned sources in note 8 and George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 10-16.

[11] Each question offered two different perspectives or understandings of each category. The question then asked the respondent to rate which perspective took a higher priority or was preferred. The goal was to ascertain what was most important within these categories.

[12] Some of these characteristics are adapted from Terri Martinson Elton, "Characteristics of Congregations That Empower Missional Leadership: A Lutheran Voice," in *The Missional Church & Leadership*

Of the twenty-five congregations, two had either no elders or no minister at the time; they were excluded. The twenty-three remaining congregations had a total of 230 ministers and elders.[13] A total of 113 ministers and elders of twenty congregations returned surveys, resulting in forty-nine percent returned questionnaires to be included in the study.

The survey results were examined on four levels. First, descriptive statistics were used to measure the five areas of the questionnaire for the population as a whole: the background information, the missional leadership practices, the collaborative practices of the ministers and elders, role understanding, and the congregational characteristics of missional transformation. Second, descriptive statistics were used to create a similar, individual profile of participating congregations based on the results of the ministers and elders from that specific congregation. This profile detailed the demographic data of an individual congregation and, based on the survey, ranked their leadership practices and congregational characteristics.

Third, advanced statistical tests were run to analyze the differences between ministers and elders based on how they scored on the various sections of the questionnaire. Plus, tests were run to determine whether the missional leadership practices, collaborative practices, and role understanding priorities, assessed in sections 2 through 4 in the survey, had any influence on the missional transformation in the congregation, which was reported in the final section.[14] Fourth, I coded the answers to the single open-ended response question in the survey to elicit from the participants further theoretical understandings about the minister-elder relationship.

Second Phase

The second phase of the project involved selecting four congregations as a sample out of the previous population to study using qualitative strategies. I decided to do on-site visits of four congregations and engage in four specific strategies of qualitative inquiry to gather

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Formation: Helping Congregation Develop Leadership Capacity, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 187-192.

[13] Some contacts did not share the number of elders and ministers at their congregation and were unattainable through internet searching. So this number represents my best guess.

[14] The two advanced tests that were run were cross tabulations and corresponding t-tests and then an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. The cross tabulation and t-tests were run to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between how the elders and ministers scored on a certain question. The OLS regression was run to determine if the results of the leadership practices, collaborative practices, and role understanding sections had a significant influence on the final section of congregational characteristics while controlling for the background data. For more information on the set-up and results of these advanced tests, see Cloer, "Missional Polity," 116-17; 141-148.

information when I visited each congregation. First, I engaged in participant observation. This method is where the researcher observes individuals, taking field notes of the activities, behaviors, and subtle cues that occur.[15] I attempted to observe a minister-elder meeting and a worship assembly in each congregation, recording my thoughts and notes about each experience. This helped provide insight on the interactions of the ministers and elders in this congregation and allowed me to observe how the ministers and elders made decisions. Observing the assembly helped me catch a sense of the culture of the congregation, as well as make me more familiar with the environment.[16]

Second, I used the method of in-depth interviewing. This involves a researcher conducting a face-to-face interview with participants. I conducted at least two interviews at each congregation. One interview was done with the preaching minister, and at least one interview was done with an elder. I decided which elders to interview by examining three factors: the elder who currently was in charge of coordinating the other elders, the elder who seemed most enthusiastic about the project, or the elder whom the minister recommended. The protocol for these interviews sought to deepen the information gained from the quantitative survey. In fact, the protocol was informed by the results of the survey from the first phase. It focused on gaining a better understanding of how ministers and elders interact and lead at that congregation—their behaviors, practices, and roles. Also, time was spent exploring how the leaders had cultivated a missional identity within that congregation.

Third, I used the strategy of focus groups. This is where a researcher brings together a group of individuals interested in the subject who may be representative of a certain population. The researcher becomes the facilitator by asking questions and managing the group as they respond and provide feedback.[17] I attempted to conduct at least two focus groups at each congregation—one of the ministry staff and one of the eldership. If the church contained only one minister, then I conducted only one focus group with the elders.

Fourth, I gathered existing congregational documents from each congregation. These documents included church bulletins, elder meeting minutes, or other material about the congregation and its leaders. One

[15] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 181.

[16] Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 26-27.

[17] Ibid., 30.

advantage of analyzing these documents is that it enriches interviewing. For example, the interviewer is able to bring up examples from these documents that are relevant.[18] I attempted to obtain certain documents ahead of my on-site visit of the congregation, including the congregational feature in *The Christian Chronicle*, recent church bulletins, and church websites. I also gathered other pertinent documents during my visit that could help me gain a clearer understanding of the context of each congregation, as well as shed further light on the minister-elder relationship.

The choice of the four congregations for the on-site visits was a process. First, congregations were eliminated that either returned only one questionnaire or contained significant transition in the ministry staff. That left 14 congregations. Second, a composite mean was created for the level of missional transformation at each congregation based on the responses to section 6 in the survey. The congregations were ranked based on their score. The top four congregations, according to the composite mean for missional transformation, offered a nice blend of church size, location, race, and region for this study. I contacted the congregations to determine the availability, timing, and distance in order to establish whether an on-site visit was feasible. All eagerly agreed to participate, and so these four congregations were selected and visits were scheduled. The top congregation, Big Rapids, was a medium-sized church located in a small town in the Northwest, and it was primarily Caucasian. The second congregation, Southside, was a large-sized African-American church located in an urban setting on the West Coast. The third congregation, Grand Street, was a medium-sized church located in a suburban setting in the Northeast, and it was mixed racially. Finally, Central Square was a mega-sized church in an urban setting in the South, and it was also predominately Caucasian.[19]

After visiting all four congregations and completing this qualitative data collection, I coded the narratives gathered from the interviews, the transcripts from the focus groups, the field notes from the observation, and the documents gathered. I took the results of the coding process from each congregation and triangulated it with the data from the other congregations. The results from the second phase were then integrated and embedded within the results from the first phase. Embedding data involves

[18] Ibid., 27-28.

[19] The names of the congregations are pseudonyms and not representative of actual congregations that perhaps currently use that name. These names will be used consistently throughout the thesis to represent the specific corresponding congregation.

using the results of the second research phase in a supportive role to the first quantitative research phase.[20] The ultimate goal was to use the explanatory research of these respected congregations in Churches of Christ to offer some qualified assertions on how the minister-elder relationship should function as a missional polity in order to help facilitate missional transformation.

Integration of Data

After combining the results from the two phases, I discerned five patterns that were supported in the coding of the four on-site visits and by the survey. These patterns are tentative expressions of what a missional polity entails within Churches of Christ. Those patterns are: (1) elders as nurturing pastors, (2) ministers as missional catalysts, (3) elders and ministers as team, (4) the wilderness, and (5) missional identity. Below I give a diagram that offers a theoretical hypothesis on how these patterns express themselves in a missional polity (see Figure 2). Then, I give a brief description of each of these patterns in the next sections with proper support from both phases of research.

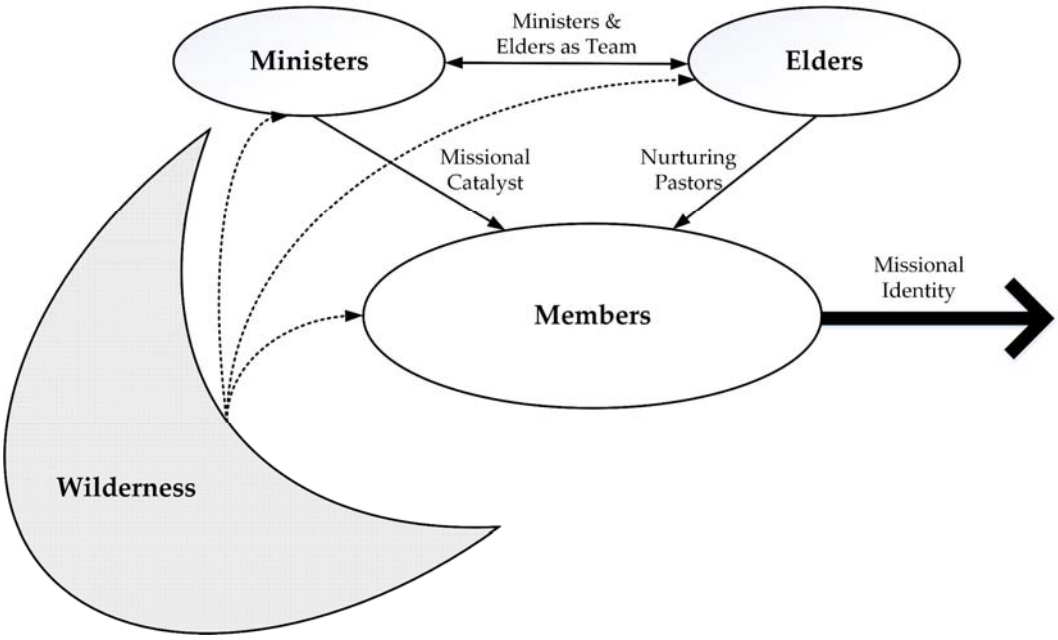

Figure 2 – Missional Polity

Elders as Nurturing Pastors

The first pattern was the elders fulfilling the role of nurturing pastors toward their respective congregations. The respondents in the survey

[20] Ibid., 207-208.

preferred the perspective of elders being viewed as shepherds rather than overseers. To understand more deeply, I probed the elders in interview on what being a shepherd meant. The consensus in all four visited congregations was that the elderships described their role as having a nurturing and stabilizing impact on the members. They emphasized that they lived out their role of being a shepherd by having their focus on people. They talked about *people* when they met, rather than focusing on church *business*. This focus was nuanced in different ways among the four congregations. The elders at Central Square focused on stability through creating balance in the worship assembly, and they nurtured the congregation by empowering the members toward ministry. They were also each tasked with pastoring an adult Bible class. The elders at Big Rapids were proactive in service and in setting a faithful example for the congregation, which helped stabilize the church. They also were honest and open to the congregation about their faults, creating a nurturing atmosphere of openness and confession. The elders at Grand Street understood themselves as shepherds and worked to pastor the congregation through consistent encouragement and prayer. The elders at Southside were available and approachable to the members. They did not ask the church to do anything they were not willing to do themselves. They were servant leaders who led by example.

The advanced statistical analysis revealed that when the elders' and ministers' primary goal is caring for and protecting the congregation, it has a positive influence on the missional transformation of the congregation. The rationale for this result may be that the four congregations studied all had elders who focused on being nurturing pastors, and that was key to their missional polity. Because these four congregations felt nurtured, loved, stable, and in an empowering atmosphere, this allowed them to develop missional imagination and seek to engage their neighbors. The elders' nurturing and faithful leadership stabilized the congregations by offering service, encouragement, and honesty and this allowed the congregation to flourish.

Ministers as Missional Catalysts

One of the unique struggles of ministers is they can suffer from role ambiguity. One minister in phase one of this study captured this dilemma well in his answer to the open-ended question of the survey, "While my understanding of Scripture is that my primary calling is that of evangelism and outreach, the church tends to expect me to be a . . . 'pastor.'" Yet the ministers in this study, particularly among the four visited congregations,

had a clearer understanding of their role. The elders functioned as the pastors, so the ministers were allowed to take a different role of being a missional catalyst within the congregation.

A catalyst is someone that spurs on change. The ministers functioned as catalysts by helping provide the elders and the congregation with a vision of that to which God may be calling the church. This did not show up as clearly in the survey. The perspective of the primary role of ministers as leaders was preferred slightly over the perspective of ministers as preachers and teachers in the questionnaire. However, the minister clearly had a catalytic role in helping cultivate a missional identity when one analyzes the data from the four congregations visited. A good image to illustrate this is how the evangelist at Big Rapids referred to himself: he called himself the "gentle goad", as he found ways to slowly push the elders in a certain direction.

The minister of each congregation fulfilled this role of being a missional catalyst in different ways. The minister at Central Square was a storyteller. He used his preaching as a means of telling stories of what God was doing among the people. This drew people into God's work and invited them to participate. The minister at Big Rapids, who went by the intentional title of "evangelist," was an equipper. He saw his role as training, equipping, and empowering disciples to minister either locally or wherever they were sent. He helped shape the congregation's kingdom vision by reframing current situations to focus on what God was doing. His passion for making disciples helped set the tone for the congregation to be concerned about the lost. The minister at Grand Street was an administrator. He was empowered by the elders to set the agenda, to communicate with leaders, and to keep the church moving forward. Also, he was the visionary who would plant ideas slowly that would eventually come to fruition. His evangelist identity helped push the congregation toward a missional identity, similar to Big Rapids. The minister at Southside was an aligner. He was new to his role, but he immediately went about the task of getting everyone on the same page and aligning ministries under the same theme of redemption. Each minister in the four congregations was using their spiritual gifts to cultivate and push the church toward being an apostolic witness and living into a missional identity.

Elders and Ministers as a Team

The third pattern is the elders and ministers functioning as a team. This is visibly seen in the results of the survey. The collaborative practice of

"cultivating a sense of team among the ministers and elders" was the second-highest practice among the leaders in the participating congregations. The perspective of the ministers and elders working collaboratively was heavily preferred over working separately. The advanced statistical analysis showed that the perspective of ministers and elders working collaboratively had a positive influence on the missional attitudes of the congregation. The responses of the open-ended question emphasized that a key area of focus for elders and ministers was cultivating their relationship. The survey clearly pointed to the idea that a key element of a missional polity is a strong teamwork between ministers and elders.

The four congregations that I visited confirmed this idea. All four congregations had leaders who had a sense of team that was built on respect and trust. The elders and ministers relied on one another and depended on each other's strengths and gifts. They did not see their relationship through hierarchical lenses, but saw themselves more as coleaders. The ministers acknowledged that the elders were the ultimate decision makers of the church, yet the elders admitted their strong reliance upon the ministers for insight and input during decision making.

This sense of teamwork had developed in the four churches in connection with a couple of factors. First, the ministers had longevity in their roles. The average length of service for ministers in the broader study was 12.15 years. The four ministers at the congregations visited had been at their respective congregations for at least twenty years.[21] This kind of longevity allows time to build trust, garner respect, and develop teamwork. Second, the ministers and the elders spent significant time together. Each minister described being together with the elders formally and informally. The leadership at all four congregations met together weekly. Also, the ministers would spend time informally with the elders. The minister at Central Square talked about going to lunch regularly with the elders. The minister at Big Rapids described book studies the elders and evangelists did together. The minister at Grand Street told of playing golf regularly with elders and how he has even taught and baptized some of the elders. The minister at Southside described the elders as if they were his own

[21] This is quite different than the normal minister tenure. Abilene Christian University did a survey of over 200 ministers in 2012. Over 75% of the respondents had been serving their current congregations for less than ten years. "2012 Minister Survey," http://www.acu.edu/siburt-institute/resources/salarysurvey/2012-survey.html (accessed Nov. 3, 2014).

family. This formal and informal interaction has helped build trust and teamwork.[22]

Third, the ministers and elders understood and appreciated their respective roles. There was little role ambiguity at these four congregations. Conversations had taken place to help differentiate the job of the elder and the job of the minister. For example, the minister and elder at Central Square—when asked independently about the minister's job description—answered the question verbatim. Obviously, conversations had occurred between them about the role of the minister. The ministers at Big Rapids used intentional language to describe themselves as evangelists in order to differentiate their role from the elders. The minister at Grand Street also acknowledged his role as evangelist and the elders' role as shepherds. The leaders at Southside blurred their role distinctions somewhat, but they divided the overall work based on giftedness. These factors contribute to a strong sense of teamwork among the leaders that had a positive impact on the missional identity of the congregation.

The Wilderness

The fourth and most surprising pattern of missional churches is an experience of the wilderness. None of congregations studied were perfect congregations, and this reality showed up in the data. One of the top three collaborative practices scored highly among all the congregations was handling disagreements. This suggests that each congregation had experienced conflict, yet they had managed that conflict effectively. I was curious when I visited the four selected congregations to hear their stories of how they handled conflict. Each of the four congregation visited shared moments of difficulty in their past. Central Square had divisions and splits that had occurred in their history. Big Rapids had ministers who had experienced moral failures. Most recently, they had a situation where a member was removed from fellowship over a controversy involving divorce and remarriage. Grand Street had experienced the resignations of three elders on the same day, decimating their leadership, and they also had suffered a scandal in their youth ministry. Southside had gone through an elder crisis in which an elder had to resign in disgrace, creating division within the congregation. Each congregation readily admitted that they experienced moments of being in the wilderness and enduring trials and difficulties.

[22] Several ministers also added the importance of including spouses into this teamwork. The minister at Grand Street emphasized that if there is conflict among elders and minister' spouses, that often grows to the partners as well. These leadership teams found ways to include spouses in their time together.

What set these congregations apart was how they handled the wilderness. They did not immediately try to fix the problem with a technical solution. Rather, they tried to see what God was doing in that moment. They were willing to stay present within the wilderness until God led them out. Each of the four churches expressed insights gained from their time in the wilderness. After its wilderness experience with church splits, Central Square expressed a high commitment to unity. They were willing to navigate balance in the worship assembly in order to avoid divisive situations. Big Rapids reframed their wilderness times of failures and discouragement as moments in which God taught the church about grace and generosity. Grand Street emerged from the elders' resignation with a freedom to forge a path toward relevance, letting go of restrictive traditions of the past. Southside learned the importance of leadership development and preparing for future elders from their elder crisis. These times of adversity helped galvanize the leaders into stronger teams that depended on one another more. They saw those moments of being in the wilderness as preparatory and formative for the missional transformation of the congregation.

Missional Identity

The final pattern observed involved the missional identity of the congregation. One of the key findings was in the advanced statistical analysis, where the results indicated that missional leadership practices have a positive influence on the missional transformation of the congregation. The on-site visits of the four selected congregations demonstrated this result as each congregation was living into a unique missional identity. This identity was expressed in various forms, but each congregation had a sense that they were not there to simply take care of one another and maintain the status quo. Rather, the missional polity had cultivated a belief that the church existed for others; because of this, they actively engaged their neighborhoods and communities.

Central Square did this by cultivating a missional culture. They encouraged members to go on short-term missions and to experience the idea of being sent. Then, those same members were challenged to apply what they learned at home. Members were empowered for ministry, and the preacher helped shape the culture by telling stories of an active God among them. Big Rapids's identity revolved around equipping and sending. The preacher had helped the church reframe their context of a nearby military base. The church saw this as an opportunity to evangelize, equip, and send. The church developed a kingdom mentality, in which

God's work was broader than their faith community. This empowered them to partner with God in God's wider activity within their state, region, and world. Grand Street's identity was cultivated in its history of planting two other churches. The preacher lived out an evangelistic identity, which set the tone for the rest of the congregation. There was a strong sense that they were there to connect with their community.

Finally, Southside had an inside-out strategy. The leaders cultivated a hospitable, authentic community where people could see the gospel. The church was a sign and foretaste of God's reign for their urban community to see and for the outsider to be drawn into. Each congregation's missional identity was manifested in various forms, yet the leaders had used their practices and roles to cultivate such an identity within the congregation by the power of the Spirit.

Conclusion

This essay has reported on the results of a research project involving elders and ministers among congregations designated as "Churches That Work." The goal was to discern key patterns that may be helpful for church leaders to navigate the elder-minister relationship and to support their congregation in experiencing missional transformation. The five patterns noticed offer hope to elders and ministers in Churches of Christ who struggle with role ambiguity or who may be experiencing a season of wilderness in the life of their congregation. They provide a pathway forward on how healthy leaders can help support missional transformation in their congregation. They demonstrate hope as they suggest that established churches can work through the malaise of the elder-minister relationship and experience missional transformation.

Steve Cloer has been the preaching minister at Southside Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas since 2006. Before that, he worked in youth and campus ministry. He and his wife, Lindsay, currently have three children: Joshua, Bethany, and Lydia. Steve graduated from Harding University with two B.A. degrees in Bible and Math. He received his MDiv in New Testament from Harding School of Theology and graduated with his DMin in Congregational Mission and Leadership from Luther Seminary.